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Into The Field: Learning about English Language Learners in Newcomer Programs

Cecila Silva

Texas Christian University

Stephen Kucer

Washington State University, Vancouver

This research examines the impact of field experiences with English language learners on the conceptual and emotional development of preservice disciplinary students. For one semester, preservice university students worked with English language learners enrolled in middle and high school Newcomer Programs. During this time the university students wrote reflection papers and grand learnings/lingering questions essays linking the field experiences with course readings and in-class activities. A qualitative analysis of these reflections found four critical content-based learnings related to English Language Learners emerged from these field experiences: (1) the distinction between content, language, and activity challenges, (2) conversational versus academic language, (3) code switching with the use of the home language in the classroom, and (4) increased confidence, empathy, and advocacy of the preservice teachers for English language learners. Suggestions for those instructors wishing to provide similar experiences to their preservice students conclude the research.

As the number of ELLs enrolling in US schools increases, so has the need to prepare classroom teachers to work with this growing population (Kena et al., 2015). This is particularly the case for middle and high school teachers in such disciplines as science, social science, and literature. Research examining preservice professional development, however, indicates that teachers are not well prepared to work with the English language learners (ELLs) enrolling in schools today. In their report to the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (NCELA), Ballantyne, Sanderman and Levy (2008) compile sobering statistics. While the majority of classroom teachers have at least one ELL enrolled in their classrooms, only 29.5% have received the professional development necessary to address the linguistic and cultural needs of these students. In terms of preservice teachers, less than one sixth of teacher preparation programs offer any coursework to support future educators in working with ELLs. Furthermore, of the 20 states that require some preparation, standards vary greatly from state to state.

Of particular interest to this study is the research focusing on middle school and secondary teachers working with ELLs. Reeves (2006) examined disciplinary secondary teacher attitudes towards professional development. She found that almost half of the secondary teachers surveyed, although feeling inadequate about their training to work with ELLs, were not interested in such training. One potential explanation for this seeming contradiction is that secondary content teachers perceive the education of ELLs as the responsibility of the English as a second language (ESL) teacher. Yoon (2008) reports similar findings with middle school teachers who also view teaching content to mainstream students as their primary responsibility, leaving the ESL teacher to address the linguistic needs of their ELLs.

In order to better address the ELL needs of preservice disciplinary middle and high school teachers, we decided to move beyond the university classroom setting and “into the field.” Field experiences for university preservice candidates can serve a number of different purposes: to observe teachers as well as students “in action,” to learn about classroom curricula, content, and instructional strategies, and to develop an understanding of the school as a community. An often overlooked purpose for field experiences is that they can also serve as a site for linking university course content with the life of the classroom. In fact, all too frequently we hear about the disconnect between university preservice education courses and the “real world.” However, the field can also provide preservice candidates with learning experiences that support and extend university coursework as well.

The need to provide preservice educators with learning experiences linking ESL course content and fieldwork is well documented. While many universities have added ESL coursework into their programs, researchers contend that these efforts fall short of their goal in that teacher candidates emerge from these programs with a set of generic ESL teaching practices (Harper & de Jong, 2009; de Oliveira & Schoffner, 2009). Harper and de Jong (2009), for example, document how when asked to describe what good ESL teachers need to know and be able to do, teaching candidates focus on the need to employ strategies that make instruction more comprehensible through the simplification of oral language and the use visuals. Teacher candidates also identify the importance of classroom environments that are welcoming to ELLs.

Although such pedagogical practices can easily be adapted into a repertoire of general effective instructional strategies, future educators working with ELLs need to go beyond the application of *just good teaching* (JGT) strategies (de Jong & Harper, 2005). A *JGT* perspective

diminished the significant differences between first and second language acquisition and the implications that these differences have for classroom practices. To fully support pre-service educators, teacher preparation programs must systematically help them examine (a) the characteristics of language, literacy and culture development, (b) the relation between first and second language development, and (c) the discipline-specific strategies needed to support academic content and language in the classroom (Harper & de Jong, 2009).

Our purposes for sending our preservice teachers who were enrolled in our English Language Learners methodology courses “into the field” were multiple. We wanted them to become comfortable when interacting with students whose English was still emerging and who may or may not have had formal schooling in their home country. As instructors of the courses, we wanted preservice teachers to not only develop content and pedagogical knowledge about ELLs, but to also have first-hand experiences observing and working with them in supportive instructional contexts. We felt that at the middle and secondary level, ELLs were often ignored in mainstream classrooms. Teachers may be uncomfortable or even fearful of ELLs and these students are frequently relegated—metaphorically and literally speaking—to the back of the classroom and their instructional needs not addressed. Finally, we hoped that our teacher candidates would have opportunities to directly work with the ELLs either in one-on-one or in small group settings.

In this article, we explore the impact of field experiences on our preservice middle and secondary university teacher candidates. We begin by discussing the settings and the characteristics of both the preservice candidates and ELL students. We then address the data sources that were gathered to document teacher candidates’ learnings from the field and how the data were qualitatively analyzed. From this analysis, four thematic learnings are identified and discussed. Finally, we offer suggestions for those instructors wishing to provide similar experiences to their preservice teachers.

Methods

Participants

The preservice teachers. The preservice teachers came from Texas and the state of Washington. They were middle and secondary level, preservice students working on a teaching credential in a content field. As undergraduates, the preservice teachers majored in a discipline,

such as science, mathematics, social studies, or English. In their credential program, they enrolled in our English Language Learners methodology courses. Most of them were monolingual English speakers and had limited experiences with multilingual learners. Thirteen teacher candidates were enrolled in the Washington state course; twenty-nine were in the Texas course.

The English language learners. As is frequently the case with ELLs, the backgrounds of the students were quite diverse. In the Washington school, the middle school students with whom we worked spoke Ukrainian, Spanish, and Arabic. The ELLs at the Texas school were both middle and high school students and represented 21 different languages. While Spanish was the primary language for the majority of the Newcomers, Arabic, Nepali, Somali, Burmese and Kinyarwanda were also prevalent in this setting. For the most part, the students at both sites were literate in their home language. Some students arrived in the United States having some academic knowledge of English whereas others did not. Like many Newcomers arriving in the United States, their formal schooling may have been disrupted at times due to political and religious conflicts (Decapua & Marshall, 2010; 2011). The ELLs were largely from working class backgrounds and, depending on their situation, did not always have two parents living at home. The students had been residing in the United States for two years or less.

The Settings

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2015), Newcomer Programs are educational interventions designed to meet the academic and transitional needs of newly arrived immigrants. The way these needs are addressed can vary depending on the school district. In Washington, the ELLs were enrolled in a middle school that had a Newcomers Program. The students were mainstreamed in disciplinary classes for most of the day. The last period was set aside for ELL instruction. During this time, the preservice teachers were given small groups of ELLs with which to work. The ELL classroom teachers provided the lessons and instructional materials. Additionally, all of the ELLs had school iPads containing a translation application that they were encouraged to use when experiencing difficulty understanding the English being used in any lesson.

In Texas, the Newcomer school served middle and secondary students. In addition to providing content and intensive language instruction, the school also serves to orient Newcomer

students to culture in the United States. The preservice teachers were placed with content teachers and were expected to participate in activities developed by the classroom teacher as well as teach two lessons they had prepared on their own.

Our preservice teachers worked in the field for several hours a week throughout one semester and we, as the instructors, accompanied them on a regular basis.

Data Collection

The preservice teachers wrote weekly reflection papers based on their experiences working with the ELL students. These reflections were shared and discussed in class and we as the instructors wrote comments on the papers as well. At the conclusion of the course, students also wrote an essay addressing their “grand learnings” as well as their “lingering questions” about teaching ELL students. These reflections and grand learnings/lingering questions papers served as the data sources for documenting the impact of the fieldwork on university teacher candidates learning.

Data Analysis

We initially read through all of the reflections and grand learnings/lingering questions papers and identified key topics that the teacher candidates had addressed. These topics ranged from error correction, use of the home language in the instructional context, student background knowledge, and motivation and engagement. Using constant comparison analysis (Gee, 2011, 2014; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Pappas & Tucker-Raymond, 2011), topics were then grouped by theme, kind, or similarity. Each group was then labeled and the nature or characteristics of each group explicitly delineated. Throughout the process, all topics within each group were examined to ascertain that they reflected similar types of meanings that fell within the definition and label of the category. When a topic did not belong within a group, it was either moved to another group or, when necessary, a new category and group was formed, defined, and named.

Following the grouping, labeling, and category defining, we looked for those categories or themes that were most prevalent and impactful on our preservice teachers. We asked ourselves, “What significant learnings did they take away from this field experience that hopefully they will use when working with ELLs in their disciplinary classrooms?” These learnings were then grouped with all field-based comments related to each theme.

Results

Four critical content-based learnings related to English Language Learners emerged from these field experiences: (1) the distinction between content, language, and activity challenges, (2) conversational versus academic language, (3) code switching with the use of the home language in the classroom, and (4) increased confidence, empathy and advocacy of the preservice teachers. These issues had been addressed in course readings and classroom activities. However, most importantly, our preservice teachers had connected these learnings to their fieldwork. The field had served to affirm, extend, and further develop our course content. What follows is a discussion of each of the four themes with examples from preservice teacher writings.

ELL Struggles: Content versus Language versus Activity Challenges

An experience frequently observed by our preservice teachers was that the ELLs had difficulty successfully engaging in a variety of assigned classroom activities. Their initial response was to attribute the difficulty to a lack of English language proficiency. However, to paraphrase an article by Mitchell (2012) that the university students had read, “language is not *all* that matters” (p. 1). Over time, the preservice teachers came to understand that lack of ELL success might be due to the relationship among a number of factors: the conceptual content of the activity; the language through which the content was conveyed, and the demands and nature of the activity itself.

A preservice teacher with a mathematics background discovered this relationship among concepts, language, and activity when working with two very different middle school ELLs. One student knew very little English, but had taken advanced courses in mathematics in his home country. The second student had a much more developed command of English, but had little formal schooling in mathematics. Both students struggled with the math activity being taught. However, importantly, they each struggled for very different reasons. As the preservice teacher wrote in his journal:

It was apparent to me that one of the students had a strong grasp of the concepts. However, when I started using academic language—e.g., slope, y-intercept—he seemed puzzled. When the question was stated in numerals and letters, he could easily solve the problem. The problem arose when the questions were stated in

words. His low-test scores were not due to a lack of content knowledge. They were due to a disconnect with the language.

In another experience, the ELLs were engaged in an activity using transition words, e.g., first, then, therefore, before, etc. They were given a comic-like strip and asked to tell a story using the provided transition words to link the individual scenes. Different ELLs struggled with this lesson for different reasons. Some did not know the transition words—the language—and randomly chose a word to use in a sentence linking the scenes. Others understood the language, but found the activity itself difficult to comprehend. They were never quite sure what they were to do with the transition words, the comic strip, and why. Once again, both groups struggled with the activity, but for different reasons. Interestingly, a number of preservice teachers involved in this assigned activity noted in their reflection papers that they, too, were confused about the purpose of the activity and what actually the ELLs were expected to accomplish.

A science activity required the students to have knowledge of the food chain as it related to various animals in the ocean. Using realistic clip art pictures of such creatures as whales, dolphins, sharks, fish, turtles, etc., the ELLs were to position each creature with the animals that it would eat. Even when the students recognized the animal and knew its English name, they had little if any knowledge about the animal's eating habits. In this activity, the interconnectedness among the content, language, and activity simply overwhelmed ELLs. As the student noted in her grand learning paper, “even though the use of clip art made the various creatures concrete for the students, they still lacked the content and language knowledge necessary to complete the activity.”

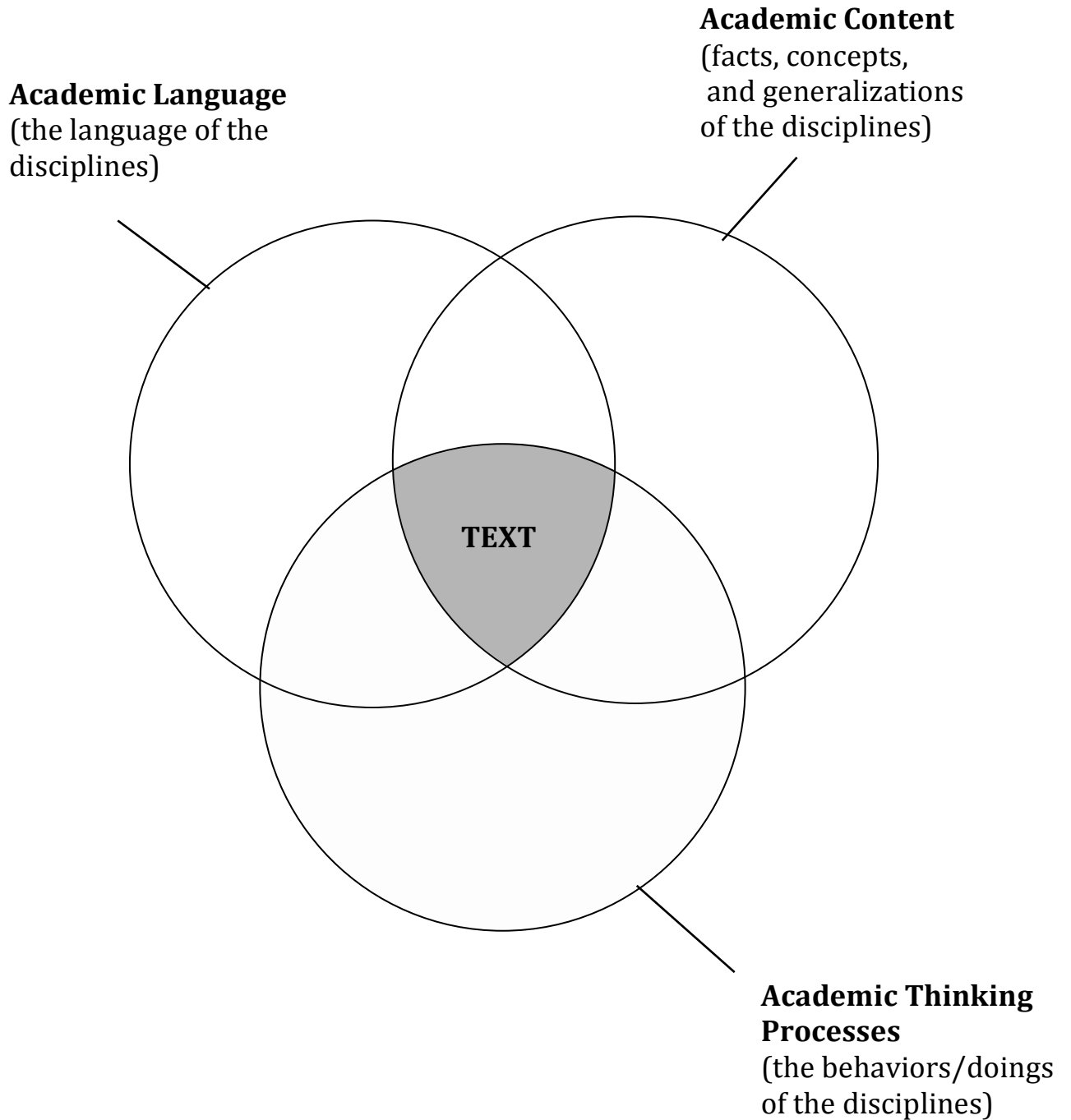
As part of another science activity, the classroom teacher wanted the preservice teacher to teach the ELLs the concept of classification. Keeping in mind the background knowledge of the ELLs, various toy animals familiar to the students were brought to the activity. The students were then to group the animals based on their particular characteristics. In this case, the students knew enough about the animals, but struggled with what it meant to group—i.e. classify—the animals based on “shared features.” The teacher candidate noted that, “They did not understand the concept of classification beyond the fact that “these are water animals.”

Of course, it should be noted that these insights by the preservice teachers were usually not spontaneous in nature. Rather, what they experienced in the ELL classrooms were always deconstructed. This deconstruction was mediated by the course readings, class discussions, and

“in the field debriefings” that occurred on a weekly basis. This deconstruction involved moving from a simple report from the field of *what* happened to a deeper analysis of *why* it occurred. In order to make explicit the intersection of concepts, language, and activity, Figure 1 emerged. At the center of the figure is the “text” that is being used in the lesson. This text is more or less accessible to the ELLs depending on a variety of factors: (1) the academic language proficiency of the student as it relates to the language of the text, (2) student familiarity with the concepts being addressed in the text, and (3) what is to be done with the text, i.e., the activity itself. The use of this framework helped the preservice teachers begin to develop a deeper understanding of ELL interactions with disciplinary texts and to better understand why the learners experienced difficulty. It allowed the preservice teachers to move beyond always attributing ELL difficulties to a lack of English proficiency.

Figure 1

Language, Content, and Thinking in the Disciplines



Conversational and Academic English

Because most of the preservice teachers were not bilingual, they tended to have an undifferentiated view of what it meant to “know” a language. The idea that the nature of, and control over, language varied depending on the situation in which it was used was a concept that they had not considered. Throughout course readings and discussions, the preservice educators encountered Gee’s (2012) distinction between nonspecialized, vernacular uses of English and the specialized uses of language in different academic disciplines. In addition, they also encountered Cummins’ (2000) notions of basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) as constructs to explain differences in the acquisition of the language used to carry out informal conversations and the language of school. These issues confronted the preservice teachers the very first week they worked with the Newcomers as they engaged in “getting to know you” interactions. Country of origin, language and family background, favorite activities, and sports were frequently discussed.

Based on these initial interactions, almost always involving the use of vernacular English, or what Gee (2012) terms as nonspecialized language, the preservice teachers frequently noted how well the Newcomers were able to speak English given their short time in the United States. Some even wondered about the necessity for additional instructional support given how well the ELLs were able to use English. This view, however, quickly changed when they began to interact with the ELLs using academic discourse that focused on disciplinary content. Suddenly, the ELLs were much less fluent and even reluctant to engage the use of English. Students who were previously highly verbal and interactive became quiet and withdrawn. This stark contrast between the ability to use vernacular (nonspecialist) and academic (specialist) English was made visible in a way that course readings and class discussions had not. Preservice teachers were also able to link such experiences to the national and state standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010; TESOL, 2006; University of Texas System, Texas Education Agency, 2009) with their emphasis on disciplinary language, literacy, and content.

One preservice teacher who worked with newly arrived Russian girls noted that:

The Russian girls I was working with were giggly, fun, and talkative in interpersonal talk. When engaged in academic tasks, however, they simply would not talk and isolated themselves from the others. They knew conversational

English but not academic. Their developing language with their peers supported conversational English, but was not enough for school.

Another preservice teacher observed:

The students are becoming more and more accomplished at basic interpersonal communicative skills. I have focused more on academic language and ignored the interpersonal. Because of this, ELLs feel more comfortable communicating among themselves than with me. They will push their use of interpersonal language when they want to communicate with a friend.

Rather than seeing these gaps between conversational and academic English—also prevalent in monolingual English speaking students as well—as problematic, the preservice teachers learned to use the nonspecialist language as a springboard to academic language. One preservice teacher brought in a variety of fossils for the ELLs to feel, touch, examine, and discuss in a rather unstructured introduction to fossils. Then, “in teaching my first formal lesson about fossilization, I used these students questions, their conversational language, and nonscientific words as an avenue for introducing academic language and concepts.”

It was through their first hand experiences with conversational and academic English that the preservice teachers came to appreciate the necessary support that the ELLs were receiving through the Newcomers Program. The very concept of “transitioning” students from the Newcomer classes to regular classrooms took on a more varied and nuanced meaning. As one preservice teacher observed:

Vernacular does not immediately transfer to academic success. Some students had mastered conversational English but struggled with content, language, or both.

Language is not just words; it is how words relate to the content being studied and the self in the world.

The Value of Code Switching, Translanguaging, and the Supportive Nature of the Home Language

In observing and working with these Newcomers, the university preservice teachers frequently noted in their reflection papers how both the home languages and English tended to be used and often within the same discussion—i.e., code switching. An individual student might begin talking in English, code switch to Arabic for a while, and then return to English. This back

and forth between languages would characterize the student's oral interactions throughout the activity. In other activities, a student might primarily speak in Spanish but occasionally insert an English word—usually an academic or disciplinary word—and then return to Spanish.

In some cases, even when ELLs knew very little English, they frequently were able to follow along. Another student in the group who had a greater command of English and shared the same home language would interpret for them. As the research makes clear (Martinez, Orellana, Pacheco, & Carbone, 2008; Orellana, Reynolds, Dorner, & Meza, 2003), this interpretation was not a word-by-word translation, but rather a summary of the key ideas being conveyed in the activity. Interestingly, it was not uncommon for these interpretations to include English as well as the home language. The interpreter would use English when discussing a disciplinary idea when she was unaware of the home language equivalent. Therefore, even interpretations typically involved code switching and the use of two languages.

The use of code switching and the home language can be viewed as having a positive impact on the students who assumed the role of translators. In one journal entry, a teacher candidate wrote:

The ability of the students to translate for another student makes the translator feel more valued. I tried very hard to constantly thank and commend the students for their efforts and abilities in translating for other students. I think it is important for them to hear how amazing their skills to translate for others actually are to people who are monolingual like me.

Similarly, another journal entry stated:

Teachers show that code switching between two languages is a powerful thing. Students should be aware of how impressive it is for them to know more than one language and I want them to feel a sense of empowerment from that language and knowledge.

In one of the middle schools, the use of technology also supported the ELL students when they were unable to interpret what was happening. Each ELL had been given an individual iPad which had a translating application. When an unfamiliar English word was encountered, they would type in the word and be given the word's equivalent in the home language. Or, students might enter a word in their home language for its equivalent in English. This application was

most effective with ELL students who had developed some proficiency in English, yet needed additional support with disciplinary content words.

While the preservice teachers had read academic articles about code switching some initially viewed such behavior as a sign of “weakness,”—i.e., the ELL lacked facility with English so needed to use the home language. In schools, this going back and forth between languages—is still often viewed as a negative practice (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011; Creese & Blackledge, 2010). This stance is grounded on the belief that if permitted to code switch, bilingual students will not be able to communicate effectively in either language.

In the literature on second language instruction, however, code switching is viewed as an inherent part of what it means to be bilingual. Research recognizes that rather than reflecting an inability to effectively communicate, these practices reveal the ability of bilinguals to strategically optimize communication to make sense of their bilingual worlds (García, 2009; Pacheco & Miller, 2016). García refers to these practices as *translanguaging*. In addition to having the ability to translate from one language to another, translanguaging serves a variety of communication functions. For example, bilinguals strategically choose to express a concept in one over the other language because they are aware that its meaning is better conveyed in that particular language. Translanguaging also serves to establish identity and social solidarity within a group.

To draw on the range of language repertoires bilinguals bring into the classroom, researchers currently advocate for translanguaging pedagogies that support the use of student’s primary language in the classroom. In observing this dynamic and interactive relationship between home and school language, a teacher candidate noted that “the school does not subscribe to an English only policy. Other students provide native language support and the role of student translators is critical.”

Given that the use of the home language is not always viewed as an effective language teaching practice, it is not surprising that teacher candidates encountered different points of views on this matter. This is reflected in the following contrasting observations. In one class, a teacher candidate notes that “teachers do not discourage Newcomers from using the home language. In fact, one teacher actually encourages it because he believes it will increase student comfort level in class.” In contrast, a different teacher candidate recaps a conversation with the

classroom teacher in which she states “that some teachers do not allow a single utterance from students of their native languages.”

Through the field experience, these preservice teachers came to understand that first language use not only supported linguistic and conceptual knowledge, but also impacted learner affect—i.e., lowered the affective filter and promoted a sense of identity—and their willingness to engage in academic activities. The following reflection offers a teacher candidate’s perspective on the teacher’s stance towards the use and learning of English in the classroom:

Thus, I am impressed by, and greatly admire, how [teacher name] frames the way he treats English in his classroom and with his learners. While he is asking the learners to use their English, he is not dictating that they may only use L2, a dictation that one may see causing anxiety and negative affective response. Rather, while English is the target language, he actively constructs English as something to “have” rather than something to “be,” which from a cultural pluralistic and cultural relativism perspective is a direct challenge to any sort of imperialistic, ethnocentric use of language to systematically strip identity and native language.

Newcomer Programs are typically transitional in nature. The goal is to teach the students English as quickly as possible so that they would be able to handle disciplinary classes. However, the teacher candidates experienced first-hand the value in teaching content first in the student’s home language. This served to provide a “real world context” for the notion of a common underlying proficiency (CUP) (Cummins, 2000), which the preservice teachers had encountered when examining the interdependence between first and second language development. When they worked with ELLs who knew the subject matter first in their home language, “adding on” English was a far easier task than having to teach both the content as well as the language. One preservice teacher wondered “how much meanings students actually take away from the lessons in English and whether it would be better if assignments were originally presented in the first language. Maybe offering educational support online in the student’s native tongue.” This led to numerous course discussions concerning the feasibility of teaching students disciplinary content first in their home language. Issues of available disciplinary bilingual teachers, instructional materials in the students’ home languages, and the impact of isolating bilingual students from other students in the school were all examined.

Increased Confidence, Empathy, and Advocacy

The final theme found in the preservice teachers' reflections revealed that their experiences in the Newcomer Programs led to increased comfort and confidence in working with ELLs. Importantly, it also resulted in empathy and advocacy for the Newcomers. Preservice teachers often used words such as meaningful, unforgettable, and eye-opening to describe the impact of their practicum. They came to appreciate the linguistic, academic, and sociocultural challenges the Newcomers encountered during their first years in the United States.

The literature on teacher education often cites the differences between the backgrounds of teachers—European American, monolingual, middle class—and that of the linguistically, culturally and socioeconomic diverse students they teach (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Gay, 2010). Completing a practicum in the Newcomer Program served to provide the following teacher candidate with the opportunity to reflect on her own schooling experience as she considered her decision to go into teaching:

Not to say that I come from a closed-off childhood, but I was sheltered enough to not know that there were refugee students in the United States that were attending public schools. As a teacher, that was never a thought in my head.

In the next reflection, another preservice teacher highlights the importance of the experience in helping him recognize that to successfully work with ELLs, teachers need to go beyond only understanding the students' academic backgrounds. Teachers also need to know about the unique cultural background of their learners:

It [the experience] has given me a much clearer understanding of how to work with ELLs and that it is not just understanding the student academically, but also recognizing the importance of knowing the culture from which the student is coming from. [...] I think without this opportunity I wouldn't have the knowledge I have now about ELL students and how to create meaningful instruction for success.

A second student shared similar thoughts.

In order to learn academic English, the student must have at least some intrinsic motivation. However, the success of the learning process does not rest solely on the shoulders of the student. In fact, teachers must utilize all available tools in

order to maximize ELL potential, and to hopefully spark the inner desire to move forward with academics.

As well as understanding the ELLs as cultural beings, the field experience challenged the teacher candidates to look within themselves before attributing problems to the English language learners. As one preservice educator stated, “While this semester has been overwhelming and frustrating at times, I have gained great insight into how I need to look at myself before I look at the students when I want something to change. Being a culturally competent and multicultural teacher is difficult. It must be rooted deeply in one’s philosophy of education.” Through the field experience, the teacher candidate learned to see himself as part of the instructional context and as an active agent in the change process.

The preservice teachers’ initial entry into the classroom setting also provoked nervousness and feelings of fear. For one of the teacher candidates, being in a classroom where Newcomers did not speak English triggered this feeling:

Before diving into how amazing my experience was this semester at the newcomer school, I would like to revisit the ‘Renee’ [pseudonym] from the beginning of the semester. I was absolutely petrified knowing that I was going to be in a classroom where the students spoke little to no English. I remember day dreaming about my first experience in the classroom and needless to say, it made me want to run for hills.

In contrast to the initial feelings of anxiety, in their final reflections, teacher candidates articulate growth in terms of confidence. The following preservice teacher expresses how the initial sense of uneasiness changes as she develops tools to support communication:

When I started my first day in the newcomer program I was both nervous and excited to work with ELLs. [...] I quickly began to realize that there are so many other tools and ways to communicate with one another without necessarily using language. I began finding other ways to help students understand by giving examples using words that they were familiar with, using visuals, and also helping them use resources such as dictionaries to help look up different words.

Preservice teachers, as one might expect in Newcomer settings, were able to experience the generic “just good teaching” practices discussed by Harper and de Jong (2009). The following reflection highlights the use of visuals, repetition, and cooperative learning. Here the teacher

candidate is able to identify JGT practices but does not articulate how these serve to support the ELLs in her classroom:

Overall, I think that this experience truly showed me how and what was needed to teach ELL students. A lot of visuals, repetition, explanation, and direct practice through activities are key to learning. Also, seeing all of the cooperative learning strategies put into action was a good thing to see because then you could see exactly what we had been talking about in class. Like the use of the Round robin, Think-pair-share, inside-outside circles, and so forth.

Other teacher candidates were able to articulate why particular practices were important in supporting language acquisition. The next entry reflects the preservice teacher's developing awareness of the role of classroom routines to support content instruction in the language acquisition classroom:

Once you can really see the students working with the teachers and the strategies put into use, it is amazing how much you can learn. I was able to see how you can push an ESL student to work harder or further their proficiency level by using peers in the class. It was also so important for me to see how routines help ESL students and allow them to focus on content rather than procedure.

While taking ESL classes is part of the required coursework for the preservice teachers, the Newcomer experience allowed some who had never considered ESL as a certification field to think of it as a viable teaching option:

Truly, I think this experience is great the way it is. It has given me great insight and has better prepared me to be a teacher; in the beginning, I would not have guessed that ESL would be enjoyable rather than stressful. Now, I wish I could go back and keep working there and I am considering getting ESL certified so that the door may be open in the future. I could see myself as an ESL teacher somewhere in my future.

In this reflection the teacher candidate expresses the desire to teach ELLs, yet, begins to frame the decision in terms of advocacy:

I will always remember my experience at the newcomer school. I think this is because the experience there challenged me and put me outside of my comfort zone, but in the end I learned so much from being there, and I wish that I could

work there because I left with a feeling of wanting to stay and work with the students. I know that I want to teach ELLs now that I have spent time in an ELL classroom. Being able to see the strengths and the weaknesses of the students makes me want to advocate for all English language learners because I want them to be successful. The opportunity to visit the school has been the best experience I have had as an education major at this university, and I think that more courses need to find ways to incorporate this kind of learning.

Other teacher candidates became advocates for the use of the ELLs home language before presenting academic content in English.

It would be beneficial to give students the opportunity to learn in their native language first. I wonder how much meaning students' actually take away and whether it would be better if assignments were originally presented in the first language; maybe offering educational support online in the student's native tongue.

One preservice teacher came to critique the general state of education as it concerned many English language learners:

Through the combination of class readings, discussions, and fieldwork, I developed a concerned awareness regarding the need to improve English language learner educational services. The American tradition of allowing ELLs to slip through the cracks, effectively making them the invisible recipients of an education that caters to others, must draw to a close.

Interestingly, increased confidence, empathy, and advocacy appeared to be synergistic in nature. As our preservice teachers came to feel more comfortable and capable in their interactions with ELLs, they were better able to understand the struggles and challenges such students face in schools. They also began to examine those educational structures that might inhibit the development of ELLs and consider alternatives to the current state of affairs.

Moving Forward

De Oliveira and Shoffner (2009) call for researchers to follow preservice teachers into their field experiences so that they can identify what these preservice teachers take away from their methods classes and implement with ELLs in their classrooms. As we reflect on the “take

always” of the preservice teachers we followed into the field, we contend that these teacher candidates did not emerge from the experience with a JGT approach to ESL instruction. Though the preservice teachers did identify general JGT strategies, they also came to a much deeper understanding of the complexity of factors that come into play when working with ELLs.

While novices to the field, the preservice teachers realize that access to learning is not solely a consequence of the ELL’s level of language acquisition. Their reflections articulate a beginning understanding of the interplay between background knowledge, the linguistic scaffolds used by the teacher, and the cognitive challenges of the activity itself. These preservice teachers also speak to their understanding of the differences between social and academic language and recognize the role of conversational language in building academic English. In addition, the reflections indicate the preservice teachers’ understanding of the role of primary language in instruction but also their ability to recognize its value as a way to empower the learners. Another “take away” that we can identify from the reflections is the value of the experience in supporting preservice teachers in developing cultural empathy as well as envisioning themselves as teachers capable of teaching ELLs in their own classrooms.

In summary, we consider field experiences in instructional environments supportive of ELLs as critical to situating the linguistic and cultural understandings developed in university coursework for preservice teachers. The interconnection of field experiences and methods courses serve to advance the preservice teachers’ conceptual understanding of the linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural dimensions of ELL students. Additionally, they encountered classroom practices and attitudes that are critical to working with English language learners. As it stands now, we call for faculty in colleges of education to engage in planning and structuring similar experiences for their preservice educators.

We suggest that teacher educators begin by integrating the knowledge and skills to support middle and secondary teaching candidates in preparing to work with ELLs within the methods courses offered by their institution. In our case, this was accomplished through the ESL courses already in existence at our universities. We then selected readings that focused on first and second language development, literacy, and culturally appropriate pedagogy. The readings ensured that the preservice teachers encountered “persistent issues”—e.g., the role of the primary language or the role of explicit grammar instruction in the classroom. Our preservice teachers, the majority monolinguals, were particularly interested to the notion of code switching,

translanguaging, and with ways of supporting ELLs in using their first language while developing proficiency in English.

A caveat in terms of the overall Newcomer experience is the crucial role that university faculty play in helping preservice teachers critically reflect on their field experiences during weekly class discussions. Cooperating teachers can have conceptual orientations about students and learning that might differ from those supported in the literature and by university professors (Lane, Lacefield-Parachini & Isken, 2003; Lucas & Grinberg, 2008). The teachers working with Newcomer students were supportive of home language use in the classroom. However, there were times when they implemented instructional techniques that were contrary to what the teacher candidates had encountered in course readings and university classroom discussions. We were able to use the university setting to deconstruct and critique these techniques that we as instructors had also observed. We examined the beliefs that might underlie such instruction, examined alternate perspectives, and suggested alternate instructional responses. In our experience, the preservice teachers noticed these contradictions and addressed them in their reflection papers as well as in our class discussions.

We believe that the course content when coupled with a positive field experience encourages teacher candidates to realize their potential as teachers who most likely will be working with multilingual learners. Our hope is that as future teachers, our students will take their “into the field” experiences into their classrooms.

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